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ABSTRACT

This paper provides information about strategies that high poverty urban elementary schools have used to initiate major reforms in their processes and structures and to share the process used to elicit information from these schools. A research study analyzed the experiences of six high poverty urban elementary schools in Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island. The intent was not to describe the attributes of successful schools, but rather to determine how they became successful, and how they maintain success. All are Title I schoolwide programs that have been nationally recognized for their excellence. Through the study, 10 strategies and reform processes were identified that affected whole school operations. Not all schools used all of the strategies, but these 10 were commonly used to develop and support capacity for continuing change and reform. The strategies are inter-related and reinforce each other; they are not ordered for sequential application. The strategies are: (1) increasing and sustaining energy flow; (2) collective grounding in a common vision or purpose; (3) recognizing the evolving school culture; (4) developing a learning ethic; (5) brining in information and skills; (6) orchestrating resources and managing limits; (7) making structural changes; (8) piloting new approaches on a small scale before bringing them to the whole school; (9) teaming to take advantage of staff expertise, increase flexibility, and encourage new roles and responsibilities; and (10) building support for decentralized decision making. Some examples of these strategies in action are drawn from the practices of various schools. The second part of the paper deals with the methodology used to map each school's reform history. Interviews and site visits were used to add to conceptual maps of the school history. This Mapping Process is a relatively quick way to engage multiple voices and allow participants to reflect on their past actions. An appendix presents the reform maps for the schools in the study. (SLD)

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Capacity for Reform:
Lessons from High Poverty Urban Elementary Schools in the Northeast

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Overview

The objectives of this paper and presentation are a) to provide information about strategies that high poverty urban elementary schoolwides have used to initiate and sustain major reforms in their processes and structures; and b) to share the inquiry process used to elicit information from those schools to map their reform histories and identify common strategies across the schools.

This research study conducted by RMC Research Corporation, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a partner in the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, set out to learn about the processes that schools used to initiate and sustain reforms by retrospectively analyzing the experiences of six high poverty turnaround elementary schools in the Northeast (MA, NY, RI). The intent was *not* to describe the attributes of successful schools (which has been done so often in educational research) but rather to learn how schools *become* successful, and perhaps more important, *maintain* success. The schools studied have been in the process of reform for approximately seven to ten years; some can be described as true "turnaround" schools. All are Title I schoolwides that have been nationally recognized for their excellence. The six schools were: Samuel Mason Elementary School in Boston, MA; Early Childhood Center #90 in Buffalo, NY; PS 139 from CSD #22 , PS 92 from CSD #30, and PS 50 from CSD #12 in New York City; and the Fairmount Primary School in Woonsocket, RI. Maps of the reform histories of those six schools are included as an appendix to this paper.

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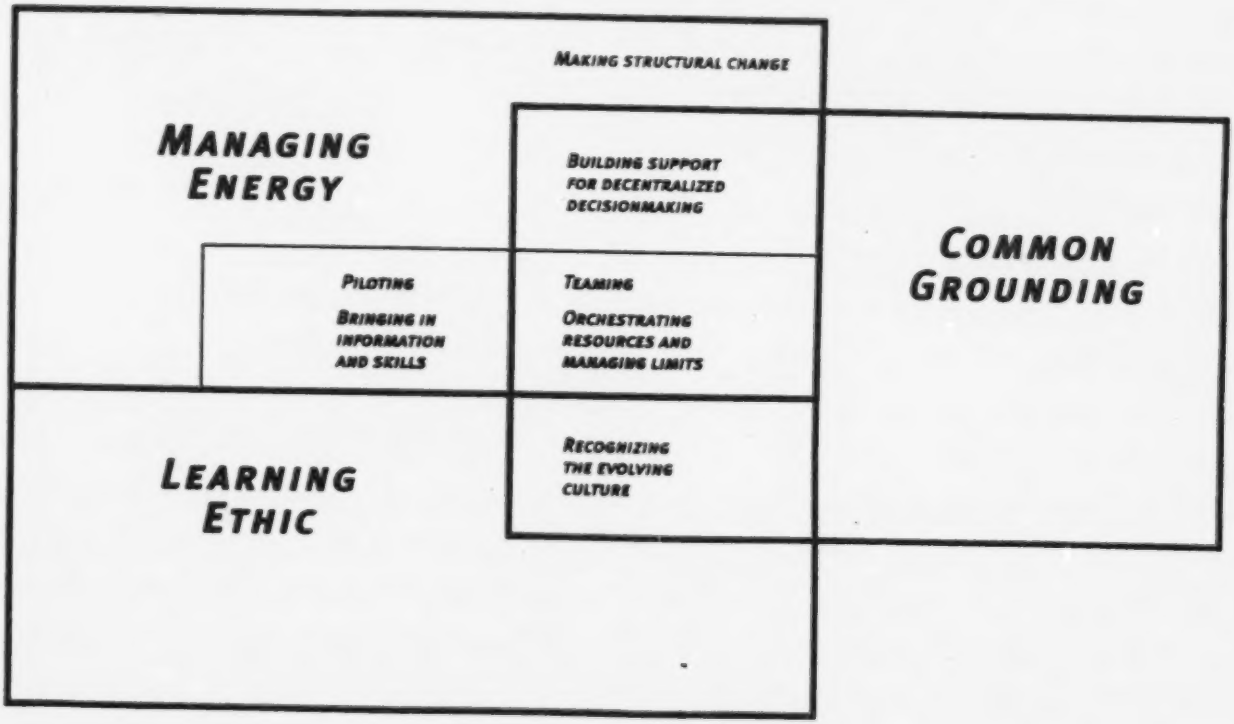
Part I: Indicators of Capacity for School Reform

Through our study, we have identified ten strategies and reform processes that affected whole school operations. Not all of the schools used all of the strategies, and we do not presume to describe all the strategies that the schools used. The schools studied are deeply engaged with the ten strategies even though they may not label them as we have here. These ten are, however, strategies that we saw commonly used and that appear to develop and support capacity for continuing change and reform. The ten are discussed below along with examples from the schools. The strategies are interrelated and reinforce each other; consequently they are not ordered or intended for sequential application; obviously, the casual application of separate strategies will not automatically build the capacities for continuous change and improvement. The figure below is a graphic illustration of the ten strategies.



ENERGY FLOW. *School staff work together to increase the energy available and keep energy flowing smoothly. Events, even potentially traumatic ones, are interpreted as opportunities to mobilize energy and change rather than as causes for panic and blame. Positive interactions among teachers, and teachers and students are a hallmark of the energy of the schools, and staff interact with each other as resources.*

We observed in these six schools that all types of events became opportunities to mobilize energy and change. One innovation triggered others: teams of one type triggered development of teams of other types; initiating early childhood classes triggered other changes in the structure of other classes; inclusion triggered other changes in the use of human resources. In the most dramatic instances, schools used even very negative events as sources of energy for change. At one point, for example, the student population of PS #50 in the Bronx dropped from 1,800 to 300 students with the loss of population in the South Bronx community. Part of the school's purpose became to help bring the community back to life, and, for staff members, a highlight of their history is to witness how the South Bronx neighborhood has now come back to life. In another example, when Boston completed its first round of recruitment for student choice in 1991, the Samuel Mason school was the least chosen school in Boston by parents. The reports of the school's least chosen status in the Boston Herald became the impetus for mobilizing major changes.

Energy is found in the experience, skills, and the enthusiasm that staff, community members, parents, students, and external human resources bring to schools. The flow of energy is influenced by the quality and quantity of interactions among those resources.

COLLECTIVE GROUNDING. *School staff have a common vision or purpose for the organization that is rooted in a deep understanding of the strengths and needs of their students, community, and the school. Staff take time to know their students from a variety of dimensions.*

RECOGNIZING THE EVOLVING CULTURE. *The school staff find varied ways to tell the "current" story of the school to strengthen shared beliefs about what is important for students and what the school can accomplish.*

In the six schools we studied, the sense of common purpose on the part of staff is based on a collective understanding of the community they serve, of the school's history, and of successfully negotiating hard times together. Staff at the Samuel Mason school have used a

reflection process on an ongoing basis to help them understand their history and culture and articulate their values about all children. This grounding enables them to have a "true North," maintaining stability in the face of inevitable changes. The reflection process heightened their awareness and discomfort, for example, about how well special education students were faring which led to restructuring classes to include more special education students in all classes.

When staff are continually talking together about ideas and projects, they are able to develop and refine common core values and beliefs and to share in creating an evolving, positive collective identity of their school. As a result, staff exhibit confidence in each other and trust that others have internalized the common vision which facilitates independent decision making.

Finding ways to express what is core in the culture of the school is especially important during times of change and is a way to "buy in" other staff and to strengthen shared beliefs about what is important for students and what the school can accomplish. Staff at PS #50 are constantly seeking a better future for their students than life in the South Bronx offers and they believe that the school is the central agent in making future goals possible. A major part of that "better" life involves becoming productive worker with a steady job. Staff frequently remind each other of examples of former students who have been successful and how the efforts of individual staff and parents contributed to the success. Staff at PS #92 talk about the school as a family with lots of emphasis on the belongingness of everyone in the school community. The entire school participates in theme activities on a monthly basis; activities are often led by the principal and involve most staff and students as well as parents. Photographs of participation in theme activities are displayed throughout the school.

Developing a school culture involves staff and parents taking the time to talk with each other in a reflective and sustained way. Staff recognize that not everyone has to be doing the same thing to have a collective purpose. The emphasis is on the sum of the parts, i.e., the effectiveness of the school as a whole in influencing students' lives, rather than the efforts achieved by individual teachers. The collective identity is built on shared experiences and thus has deep meaning.

LEARNING ETHIC *School staff are continuously learning new skills with a focus on the development of professional skills to enhance each staff person's capacity to effectively engage all students in academic learning.*

BRINGING IN INFORMATION AND SKILLS *School staff are active shoppers for information to strengthen and expand the school's capacity to learn. The new information adds to staff expertise, suggests new things to try, and provides the school an external mirror of professional expectations.*

ORCHESTRATING RESOURCES AND MANAGING LIMITS *The school staff pay close attention to the way existing resources are deployed, including staff, budgets, materials and space. School staff act as wise consumers and are on the constant lookout for additional resources.*

In these schools, it was generally accepted that staff are continuously learning new skills to build the capacity to engage all students in academic learning. Staff are continually asking questions about how to work together to strengthen learning opportunities for students. The culture of change is one that seeks answers to those questions, and defines success as fully exploring alternatives, not only arriving at successful responses. Professional development takes place through formal activities and multiple other strategies. At the Fairmount school, all staff meetings are reserved for professional development; other means have been found for disseminating the information that usually occupies staff meetings. At Samuel Mason, high expectations for children are paralleled with high expectations for teachers who are expected, for example, to achieve dual certifications. At PS #50, professional development is organized to allow for peer support and work against teacher burnout, i.e., content or grade level groups are able to go to the same training opportunities to support each other in application of new learnings.

In these schools, individuals and small groups "scout" information and bring it back to the rest of the school for training, piloting, or modeling. Staff design, implement, and evaluate the translation and adaptation of information and skills, integrating pieces that are successful and discarding pieces that are not. The focus in not on the "best" model but rather on learning from many options. Training and information gathering help to clarify school direction, reinforce core beliefs, and support a culture of learning. Often small scale experimentation, i.e., trying out a new strategy and critically assessing its fit to the goals and culture of the school, is the preferred approach rather than whole school replication.

The six schools paid close attention to the deployment of resources, acting as wise

consumers, and creatively seeking other resources to expand the range of offerings. Early Childhood Center #90 developed a close relationship with central office staff, enabling the Center to become a pilot for a variety of programs in the district. A school-within-the school, the King Center, was developed through partnerships with higher education institutions, in order to bring computers and expertise in authentic assessment to the school. The school negotiated the use of alternative assessments and gained a Title I waiver to satisfy federal requirements with portfolio and other types of alternative assessments.

> ***STRUCTURAL CHANGE.*** *Schools make structural changes to improve learning outcomes -- changes in the way time is used and the way groups are organized.*
>
> ***PILOTING.*** *School staff pilot and experiment by trying out new strategies and structures on a small scale before bringing them to the whole school.*

We observed that structural changes can be a source of energy, a way to catalyze and make profound changes in how a school functions and open up other ways of looking at students. Structural change might include looping, mini-schools, heterogenous grouping, multi-age classrooms, inclusion, team teaching, alternative uses of time, alternative staffing structures, etc. Structural changes can contribute to a climate of experimentation and flexibility if not imposed as a "one size fits all" change. The schools in our study did not make structural changes in reaction to educational trends but rather because of high expectations for all students. They relied on the skill, commitment, and wisdom of staff to create ideas for structural changes, allowed buy in at staff members' own paces, and expected adaptations of practices to improve outcomes. For example, PS #139 created mini-schools with four to six classes across three to four grade levels to support transition of students, integration of curricula, and promote parent involvement. The mini-schools were a response to having three buildings located a mile apart on two campuses, a student body of over 1600, and a highly diverse community with many new immigrants.

By piloting new strategies and structures on a small scale, staff bring new ideas and energy into the school, exercise their skills as expert decision makers, and refine staff understanding of shared objectives. Piloting implies that outcomes are discovered, and there are not predetermined conclusions. As such, it is a low risk way to try our new roles, perspectives, solutions, and build in-house expertise. We found the flow of pilots to be continuous in the

schools in the study.

TEAMING. *Teams of all types are in place to take advantage of staff expertise, increase the flexibility for planning and programming, and encourage people to take on new roles and responsibilities.*

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZED DECISION-MAKING. *At the schools, a variety of groups formed to make decisions about and take responsibility for instructional and administrative work.*

In the six schools, we observed a great dealing of teaming as well as decentralization of decision making; in other words, one team did not make all the decisions. Both strategies vastly increase the amount of work that can occur simultaneously. Teaming of staff in many different ways allow a school to take advantage of expertise. We saw many different types of teams: grade level teams, cross-grade teams, looping teams, mini-school teams, in-classroom teams, site based management teams, etc. Decentralized decision making requires that a variety of groups forms to make decisions about and take responsibility for instructional and administrative change. Decentralization can exist when staff believe that their colleagues are persistent and interested in positive outcomes, there is honesty about individuals' strengths and weaknesses, and staff believe that they can influence each other. Further, the staff need confidence that some teams and individuals are minding "the whole picture" and the willingness to fail and allow failure in experimentation.

At PS #139, a parent has historically headed the schoolwide program committee that includes representatives of the full school community. The team emerged from the schoolwide planning process and has created other teams for various purposes. Samuel Mason staff created many types of working teams empowered to make real decisions. The site based management team at Samuel Mason acts as a stop gap for problems by helping other teams focus on what is central to the school mission. Teams may come to the principal for review of plans but she does not make decision for them. Each team has a liaison that meets with the site based management team; the liaison acts as an advocate for the team and a communication link to the rest of the school. Teams formally present plans to the site based team which reviews each team's plan; when a team plan gets a go-ahead from the site based team, the full school votes on the plan.

Conclusions

The results of this study may of interest to schools attempting to make substantial changes in how they function and are structured, and/or maintain improvements that have been made. The focus on capacities, skills, and resources provides implications for policymakers at all levels about creating the context and supports for school-level changes to occur. For example, the results of the project have already been used in the planning of the School Based Planning/Site-Based Decision Making Initiative of the Board of Education in New York City. The mapping process (see Part 2 of this paper) that was used to generate data for the study may be of interest to schools and researchers, facilitators, and providers of assistance to schools engaged in inquiry and evaluation of their practices and beliefs.

Part 2: Mapping Process

To gather data, the study employed a process of mapping each school's reform history through group discussion with school teams representing a variety of internal and external stakeholders. A conceptual map was developed for each school to represent its reform history (see appendix for copies of reform maps from the six schools). Customized follow-up interviews and site visits were based on themes emerging from each school's history. The follow-up interviews and site visits gathered additional data on each school's reform history and the strategies the school employed to initiate and sustain reform. Data synthesis processes included identification of sense-making strategies at different stages of reform, as well as specific skills, resources, and capacities required to undertake reform.

The Mapping Process is a relatively quick process that engages multiple voices in a discussion of important events in a school's history and allows participants to reflect on their collective perceptions of the history. It consists of asking the participants (usually a cross-section of staff, administration, parents, and other key stakeholders) to discuss retrospectively the key events, people, processes, thought patterns, and decisions that took place as their school went through school reform/change process. The Mapping Process increases participants' awareness of past actions and their connections to current conditions in the school, enhances a school's capacity to reflect on the variety of programs and restructuring efforts it has developed over time, creates a collective understanding of the school's history among new and experienced staff, and provides data for decision-making and planning.

Mapping Process "How To." After a presentation on the purpose of the mapping session (for research, visioning, identification of culture/beliefs, historical documentation, etc.), participants introduced themselves, giving four pieces of information about themselves. To develop the "timeline" for framing the discussion, participants answered two questions about the reform process. Their answers created the starting point for the map's timeline. To begin the discussion of the key events, people, processes, thought patterns, decisions, etc. that took place as the school went through change, the facilitator asked "What were the events/key elements of your school reform/change process?" Participants' answers were written on post-it notes and attached to a long sheet of poster paper on which was written the timeline dates that the

participants had set. The post-it notes were placed on the map along three parallel lines labelled to represent three main areas of discussion concerning school reform. A notetaker captured the detailed discussion, while the facilitator wrote words, dates, or brief phrases on the post-it notes to mark on the timeline the particular activities or events, and probes for additional information including other key events and readiness factors.

After the participants finished their discussion of the school reform/change process, the facilitator asked them to look at the "map" of post-it notes and reflect on particular connections among any of the events posted on the timelines, or identify phases or patterns. To wrap-up the mapping session, the participants were asked about other elements of the school reform/change process that have not been captured or if particular stakeholders were missing from the day's discussion who would know important parts of this story. The facilitator asked the participants for ideas on the richest way to get at what is beneath/behind these events. If the Mapping Process is being used as part of a larger project, participants' answers are used to plan follow-up visits or interviews for additional data collection and refinement. Total time for the Mapping Process is approximately 2 hours.

Appendix

Reform Maps of Schools in the Study

ABC School
Summary of Mapping Exercise

General Timeline

1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997-on

Major Themes

Planning→→→→→→→→→→→→→

visioning, change, bonding, negotiation, development of structure and process for decision-making, scouting for and control of resources

- Schoolwide Program Planning (1990-91)
  - intensive planning period (Feb-June 91)
  - learned about Principal, staff, and community flexibility
  - had control over school budget ($750,000)
  - strong parent leadership
  - increasing staff interest in bottom-up reform
  - learned how to function as a committee of diverse perspectives (parents, staff, administration)
  - staff development to ease transition to SWP (especially in Reading/Language Arts)
  - assistance from SWP facilitator

Programs/Instruction ←→→→→→→→→→→→→→

EFG School
Summary of Mapping Exercise

Major Themes	Key Events/Points of Reference	Developments/Reforms
Literacy/Reading	•Reading Recovery Training (90-92) •Running Records/Portfolios (90) •ELEC (94-95) •Work on own Language Arts Curriculum (95)	•Use of proven model designed to strengthen individual students' skills (Reading Recovery) •Literacy as the goal •Using (and discarding) pieces of instructional models
Staff Development	•Reading Recovery Training (multiple staff) (90-92) •Texas SWP Conference (91) •Apple Computer Training (training of staff by staff)(93) •Superintendent invitation to attend meeting on Kodaly music (94) •ELEC (94-95) •Staff meetings devoted to staff development (ongoing)	•Peer support and trust •Learning from experience and experimentation •"gatherers" of information •making "information" their own
Class Configuration	•Multicultural (91) •Movement away from Title I pull-out (91) •Conflict Resolution activities (92) •Looping (93) •Multi-age (93) •School space constraints hit peak (93) •Inclusion (95-96)	•Role and number of adults •child focused •no need for uniformity of structure/implementation
District/State Environment	•State approaches school to be SWP (91) •National Title I Recognition (94-95) •Loss of ESL teachers (92), Reading Director (94)	•isolation •rules/regulations unclear •lack of recognition •"ahead" of district •little use of outsiders/but use of outside information
Decision Making	• New Principal (89) •SWP/School Improvement Team (92) •Decisions about reading supplies/spending done at school level (92)	•Principal and School Improvement Team roles

HIJ School
Summary of Mapping Exercise

General Timeline

1980 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997

Major Phases

Critical Change

Desegregation/EC Centers →→→→

KLM School
Summary Mapping Exercise

Major Themes	
Inward Focus: Students, Staff, Classroom 1986 — 1991	**Outward Focus:** Whole School, Community 1992 — 1997 - on
Empowerment: • CSIP (1986) - curriculum committees, increase in teachers taking active role in overall school, not just in their classrooms • School Improvement grant (1989) • SBM (1991) - staff had a hand in determining future of the school **Enabling Factors for Change:** • Principal - focus on improvement and strengthening in-house personnel • Latchkey Program (1980's) • Long-term, professional, dedicated staff • Infusion of Community Development/Revitalization Grants in Bronx (around time of CSIP) **Entrepreneurial:** • Early partnerships: NACME, Con.Ed. (1990) **Obstacles:** • Community poverty/Change in student demographics • Some early staff resistance to SBM/SWP efforts	**Empowerment:** • Community School Project Grant (1992 - on) • Parent courses/access to school (GED, computer access) • SWP (1992) - increase flexibility of site based management, increased flexibility of instructional practice/use of staff • Chapter 1/Title I National Recognition (1996) **Enabling Factors for Change:** • SWP Facilitator provided by Teacher Center to help develop vision and assist in early SWP planning efforts • New Principal (1992) • Mini-schools structure (1992), Special Education pilot (1993) • Professional Development (science, mathematics, technology) • Goals 2000 (1996), Golden Hour (1991) **Entrepreneurial:** • Increased Focus on Grant Writing • Library Power Program (1992), Title VII Grant (1993) • Waterford Institute/TMI (1992 - on) -professional development, computers, prof. development lounge • Farm for Kids (Vermont) Program, LEAP (1992), Wave Hill (1994), Virtual Y (1997), Bronx Dance Theater, New York Cares (1994-95) • Principal for a Day - Volvo dance studio **Obstacles:** • Time constraints/potential "burn-out" of staff

PQR School
Summary of Mapping Exercise

General Timeline

1986 1987 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997

Major Themes

Climate
- Early identity as "bottom school" in district/isolation from district
- Sense of struggle for resources, recognition, and control with external entities
  - School staff as extended family
  - Principal/Teacher commitment to school
  - Dissatisfied teachers leave
    - Team/whole group activities-events
    - Shaping climate to support teaching staff
    - Sense of safety/trust
    - Sense of fun as a group
    - Peer pressure to participate + opportunity to opt out
    - Traditional focus on discipline/self-esteem of students

Structure
- Leadership Committee (1986-87)
- Family Room (1987)
- Change from K-2 to preK-5 grades (1986-87)
- Old building -- collapse (1987)
  - Schoolwide program (1990)
  - Population changes (1990 - 347, 1993 - 500, Present - 823)
    - New building -- construction (finished 1993)
      - Space constraints (school built for 600 students)

Leadership
- New leadership/early conflict with parent groups (1988-89)
  - Principal's vision for SWP
  - Principal's experience in allocation of/management of personnel
  - Staff reluctance, but growth into responsibilities (3 SWP votes before reaching 75% threshold in 1990)
  - Core group of staff/parents in SBM/SWP
    - Peer pressure for Scaling-up change with opportunity to opt out

Teaching/Professional Development
- Focus on literacy/whole language (1990)
- Staff development on literacy/reading, partnership with Houghton-Mifflin, in-house staff
  - Use of resources for materials/supplies/staffing (1991-92 SWP and Magnet)
  - Magnet Program (1991-92)
    - Common reading time for students/planning times for teachers
      - Ambivalence about value of assessments for demonstrating achievement

XYZ School
Summary of Mapping Exercise

General Timeline

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996

Major Phases

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
preparation	putting structure in place	deeper structural development	change in ways of doing business	control of resources	consolidation and future planning	

Developments/Reforms

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
•reflection on status •scouting reform •training •new leadership	•team development •taking stock •vision •expectations •customer focus	•schoolwide •program development •inclusion •teaching & learning •partnerships	•locus of control •training •inquiry/evaluation •outcomes •teacher teams •teaching & learning	•recognition •staff development •use of talent •inclusion •technology	•future orientation •learning	

Key Events/Points of Reference

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
•X becomes Principal •Choice is implemented in Boston schools •Basal-driven reading curriculum	•School-based management •Accelerated Schools training •"Least Chosen" school headline in media •implemented early childhood program • Teams (curriculum, teacher, school climate)	•became Title I Schoolwide Program •inclusion in early childhood program •whole language •portfolios	•John Hancock/TQM training •Teacher reports/plans •program evaluation	•Wheelock reading program •25-50 hours staff development •began winning awards •computers in classes •dual-certification of teachers	•Bright Start program •teacher study groups •focus on core academic mission •student motivation/ learning increasing	